

Do We Welcome What Invigorates Us?

Beloved community, this morning's scripture readings invite us to reflect on this question: Do we welcome what invigorates us? Let us pray:

Oh God, we need your Spirit to breathe into every pocket and corner of our lives. We need Jesus' spirit to continue to teach us the presence of life after life. As we wonder this morning, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and wisdom to discern the one from the other. Amen.

"Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."

The prophet Ezekiel wrote his material across twenty-two years while in exile with his community, far from their home in Jerusalem. Around 600 BCE, the Babylonian army had attacked the prominent and sacred city of Jerusalem, capturing many of its residents and forcing them to migrate to Babylon where they were stuck as a community for fifty to sixty years.

Scholars estimate that the number of Jerusalemites captured and taken into exile was between fourteen and eighteen thousand. It makes sense that the experiences Ezekiel heard his community expressing held these themes: *"Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely."*

Two prompts appear on our sermon response page inserted in today's worship bulletin. It would be my privilege to prayerfully hold your reflections with you if you place them in the offering plate. The first prompt connects to our first reading, which is often referred to as the story of "the valley of the dry bones."

- In what circumstances of your life have you felt dried up, lost from hope, cut off?

The second prompt relates to the gospel story for today, often referred to as “the raising of Lazarus.”

During the recent season of Epiphany in this first of three years in the lectionary cycle, we were hearing from the gospel of Matthew. Now in Lent and Easter, we are hearing from the gospel of John – the outlier gospel. Matthew, Mark and Luke share a great deal of overlapping content in their stories about Jesus. On the other hand, John excludes some of the stories from the three synoptic gospels and includes multiple stories found nowhere else. Among them are stories from recent Sundays (Jesus conversing with the Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus healing the man born with blindness) and today’s story of the raising of Lazarus.

Growing up through parochial grade school, I memorized many biblical verses. I recall learning that the briefest verse in the Bible was John 11:35 – “Jesus wept.” John was the last gospel to be written (around 90 to 100 CE) and the only gospel that doesn’t clearly name its author. This gospel is known for portraying Jesus as often speaking about in-depth theological beliefs, emphasizing his connection to God and his own divinity.

Accordingly, John’s stories also focus on the lore of Jesus’ larger-than-life supernatural power over death. I appreciate how today’s story includes Jesus’ beautifully relatable human experiences of decision-making and emotional response alongside his more exceptional qualities. The prompt for further reflection on the gospel story is this:

- Jesus was “*deeply moved*” while grieving Lazarus’ death alongside fellow mourners. What loss in your life (a big change of some kind) do you need to grieve in ways that deeply move you? How might you grieve that loss well (wholeheartedly, honestly, in your own way)?

When our neighbors’ bells ring, we will pause to appreciate silence and sit with these questions.

As we wonder together this morning about whether or not we welcome what invigorates us, let's invite each reading to offer us new insights for the living of our own lives in each community of which we are part – our relationships with ourselves, our families, neighborhoods, workplaces, this congregation, and others.

As People's Church, we are a community in the middle of a valley. Hear again the opening words from the prophet Ezekiel:

“The hand of the Lord came upon me, brought me out by the spirit of the LORD and set me down in the middle of a valley; it was full of bones. [God] said to me, ‘Mortal, can these bones live’ I answered, ‘O Lord GOD, you know.’”

I am encouraged, week by week, as I sense this: As we slowly grow in strength of participation and energy during this chapter in our life cycle as a congregation, we are also deepening our motivation to keep our senses open and our postures responsive to the life cycles to which we are connected in the St. Croix Valley.

Is our locale full of dry bones only? Certainly not! We witness vibrant efforts toward welcome, inclusion and justice all around us. Yet we also know that there are individuals and whole communities that feel dried up, lost from hope, cut off. I wonder: **How do we respond when we sense pain in persons who are living in drought times (experiencing great loss; lacking access to resources; suffering with illness in body, mind or spirit)?** In a few moments, we will notice how Jesus responded to pain in his community.

Let's hear again a word of God (of Love, of Life) through the prophet Ezekiel:

“O dry bones, hear the word of the Lord. Thus says the Lord God to these bones: I will cause breath to enter you, and you shall live. I will lay sinews on you and will cause flesh to come upon you and cover you with skin and put breath in you, and you shall live...”

It was from this passage that I drew the question, ‘Do we welcome what invigorates us?’ When have you recently felt the breath of God (that all-loving healing Spirit, powerful beyond our comprehension – THAT breath) entering you or someone you love, causing the growth of new aliveness (sinews, flesh, skin, breath)?

- Perhaps when making a decision to retire.
- When discerning a move to more right-size home.
- When reaching out for support in a struggle with addiction.
- When fully recognizing and naming a mental or physical health challenge, opening a door toward healing.
- Making an honest and full apology, with a desire more for forgiveness and deepening of relationship than for superficial clarity of conscience.

Each of these is an exhale that makes space for the Spirit to breathe into our lives, renewing our vigor!

Let’s return to the gospel reading for today. Here is the phrase (spoken both by Martha and her sister Mary) that most struck me this week:

“Lord, if you had been here...”

Thank God that Jesus both listened attentively to each of the sisters as they expressed what they imagined what his sooner presence would have done – AND – that Jesus knew where he needed to be present. Let’s remember the movements of the story.

At first came the sensational community news. A beloved member (almost an extended family member) was very ill. But Jesus chose to stay away, chose that that was not where he was needed right then.

After that, as he began to make plans for where to go, his friends were very worried about his safety, questioning his decisions about where he needed to go (traveling back to Judea). But Jesus took stock and knew where he could recognize safety in place day by day that he could rely on.

When he finally arrived to the scene, he was expected to be the hero – to take action right away. They were fairly chomping at the bit in their grief and in their pain. But he did the work he knew was most important, which was to weep in community with them – to pause and to be emotionally present with them.

And then, when those around him had lost hope enough that hope felt dead and inaccessible, he came with clarity to say, *“take away the stone, unbind him and let him go.”* Friends, what do you need to be fully present enough and ready to unbind? What do you need to be fully present enough and ready to let go of? The Holy Spirit will breathe courage into you.

May we be like Ezekiel, watching for and embracing the breath of life wherever it arrives. May we be like Jesus, fully present, aware of the effects of our own presence and of those around us. May we each be channels through which the Holy Spirit invigorates us, because Love is counting on us. Amen!

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People’s Congregational Church (Bayport, MN)
March 26, 2023 (5th Sunday in Lent)
Ezekiel 37:1-14, John 11:1-45